

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Forests & Forest Health

Testimony of Eva Patten, Spokesperson for the Upper Gallatin Community

The Upper Gallatin Community

28355 Gallatin Road
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March 24, 1998

Representative Helen Chenoweth, Chair
House of Representatives Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health
1337 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

RE- H.R. 3381: The Gallatin Land Consolidation Act of 1998

Dear Representative Chenoweth and Subcommittee Members:

We would like to thank Representative Rick Hill and his staff for their hard work in bringing H.R. 3381, "The Gallatin Range Consolidation and Protection Act of 1998", to this subcommittee for discussion. The Montana delegation and people of Montana have worked together for many years to consolidate public land in the Gallatin National Forest. This is the last, and perhaps most critical, phase of the effort. We appreciate this opportunity to express our support.

The property owners within or near the Taylor Fork drainage including Nine Quarter Circle, Trapper Cabin, Covered Wagon, Elkhorn and Black Butte ranches have formed a local community group to speak with a common voice about our hopes and concerns for the future of our region. These lands are home a place where many of our families have lived since the turn of the century; a place we cherish for its natural beauty and the abundance of wildlife. It has provided a livelihood for the dude ranchers who have brought guests to the area for the last 75 years. We strongly support ongoing efforts to consolidate public land here and end the checkerboarding which threatens the future of Taylor Fork and makes management such a challenge.

If you could stand in the Taylor Fork basin, you would be seeing streams lined with willows, extensive grasslands and rolling sagebrush hills leading into forests and the rugged Taylor Peaks. This is home range for more grizzly bears than any other place in the lower 48 states. It is a migration route, winter range and calving ground for the Gallatin elk herd and habitat for one of Montana's top three concentrations of moose. Declining species such as the Westslope cutthroat are found here. "Unique" is an overused word but Taylor Fork is truly unique.

Folks from all over Montana and from far beyond our borders come here to hunt, horseback ride, fish, hike, bicycle, snowmobile, cross country ski, watch wildlife, vacation at local dude ranches, study and learn about

the ecosystem and wildlife, backpack, picnic, and generally enjoy this exceptional country.

Over the last decade or so, Taylor Fork has begun to show the effects of increased human usage. Some areas are degraded and conflicts with wildlife have increased with added recreational use. Streams are showing elevated sedimentation levels due to land disturbance and road erosion. On one prime section, cabins on 20 acre subdivided plots have replaced the elk who traditionally bore their young there each spring.

Conversations at our potluck suppers and get-togethers are filled with stories from the past and worries for the future. Taylor Fork's location between the rapidly growing Big Sky area and Yellowstone Park and its easy access make it vulnerable for over-development and degradation. This important park buffer is being squeezed from several directions. Without consolidation to better provide for wildlife, to protect water quality, prevent overuse and minimize development, the future for Taylor Fork is indeed bleak.

Obviously, after reading our descriptions of this very special place, you know we support H.R. 3381. We would, however, like to make a few comments for your consideration as the option agreement is adopted.

There must be an absolute guarantee that the Taylor Fork sections will not be withdrawn after two years. It is the goal of the legislation to ensure the consolidation of public land in the Taylor Fork, and essential that the matter be addressed as the option agreement is finalized. If this guarantee is not forthcoming, we will no longer be able to support the bill.

Direct acquisition through cash purchase should be maximized. Our group, under the leadership of the Kelseys at the Nine Quarter Circle Ranch, and in conjunction with the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation raised over a quarter of a million dollars for the Taylor Fork acquisitions. Through raffles, donations and an auction, little by little this money was raised to show our commitment to the future of Taylor Fork. We are encouraged by the allocation of Land and Water Conservation Funds and hope funding can be increased so that the entire \$6.5 million maximum specified in H.R. 3381 will be reached.

We are sensitive to the needs and concerns of those being impacted by the proposed land exchanges and timber cuts. We take a broad view of not wanting to see other important watersheds, wildlife and recreation areas degraded in order to help protect these qualities in our backyards. Residents in the Bridger Canyon working with the Forest Service, Fish, Wildlife and Parks, and Big Sky Lumber have significantly improved the initial option proposal by the inclusion of public access guarantees, watershed protections, lowered densities for Bridger Canyon and purchase options for Battle Ridge residents. These are important considerations. We also support their request for timber harvest guidelines for the 60 million boardfeet of timber on public lands being traded to BSL in the Bangtails.

The "restoration" provision noted in Section 5(e) are critical to the future of the area. We urge that sufficient funds be made available to carry out the restoration program and to amend the Gallatin Forest Plan after the completion of this Act.

We appreciate the opportunity to comment and look forward to working closely with this subcommittee, Representative Hill and Montana Senators Baucus and Bums to make this a landmark effort demonstrating how varying interests can come together for the benefit of the entire region,

Sincerely,

Eva Patten
Spokesperson for the Upper Gallatin Community

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